

Tales of the Black Cloth August 14

A regular reader of *History Today* recently reminded us that we had not done an article on “Black Cloths” in recent memory, and that a majority of the current workforce doesn’t know what they were and what their importance to NSA was.

From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, as the Agency expanded rapidly due to an upsurge in hiring sparked by the Vietnam War, many offices found that they lacked sufficient secure storage. The rules for classified material required that it be locked up in desks or safes at the end of the day, when an office closed.

As a temporary expedient, the security organization granted offices a waiver: classified materials on desktops or in unlockable containers could be covered with a piece of black felt when the office was unoccupied. This would be considered



“secure” until such time as the office had enough lockable containers.

A Black Cloth

We don’t have exact dates for the duration of this waiver, but note that in this case “temporary” ran for more than a decade.

When we wrote about Black Cloths in another medium a couple of decades ago, the History Center received some interesting recollections about the squares of black felt. We’ll publish an anthology of them next week.